

KARAKORAM NOMENCLATURE

PROFESSOR KENNETH MASON

IN publishing the conclusions reached by the Karakoram Conference during the winter of 1936, it seems appropriate to place on record both the origin of that conference and the various stages of its work. It was during a study of the literature of the Karakoram more than twenty years ago that I noted the growing inconsistencies regarding range-names among travellers and writers on the region. At the end of my paper on the Shaksgam valley and Aghil range read before the Society on 24 January 1927, I called attention to these inconsistencies (*Geogr. J.* 69 (1927) 311), and in notes by Dr. T. G. Longstaff and myself, written after the discussion on that occasion and published with my paper, certain tentative proposals regarding the range names were put forward for examination. These proposals were at the same time submitted to the Surveyor-General of India (Sir Edward Tandy), who expressed the opinion that the whole question of Karakoram nomenclature should be discussed by geographers and travellers with special knowledge of the country. In a semi-official letter to me, a copy of which he addressed to the Society, he asked me to consult with the Royal Geographical Society, and intimated that he would be prepared to accept the decisions reached after such consultation.

In his preface to my official report on the Shaksgam Expedition of 1926, Sir Edward Tandy gave his personal views as follows:

I do not consider this department should decide questions which depend so much on international usage. We can only assist by publishing the suggestions of our best experts, and then hope that the Royal Geographical Society, which includes all the principal geographers and explorers interested, will find an early opportunity of discussing these suggestions and of arriving at decisions, in which case we shall be happy to accept them and to incorporate them on our future maps (*Records of the Survey of India*, vol. xxii, p. iv).

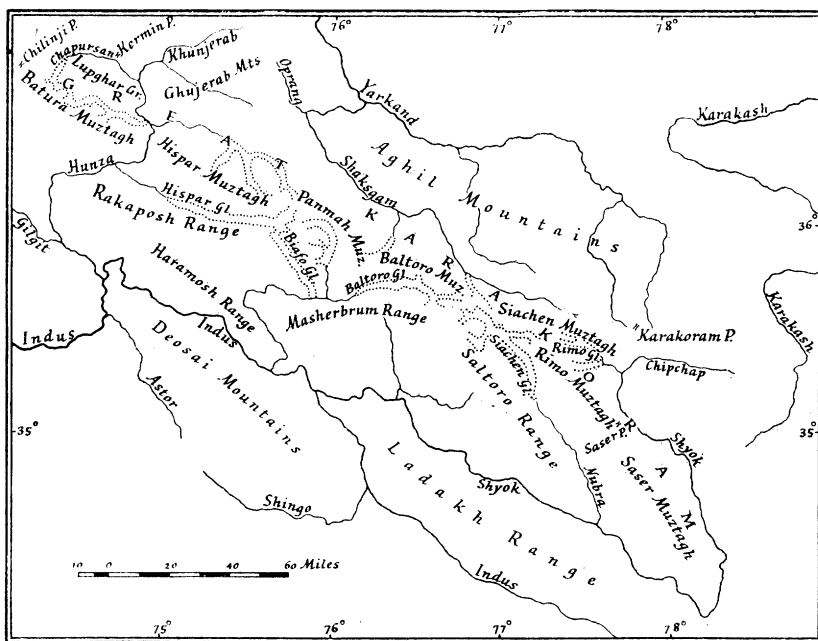
This was the origin of the special interest which the Society has taken in the matter during the last ten years.

While on leave in England in 1927, and in India subsequently, I devoted much time to collecting the references from published material, discussed them personally and by letter with various travellers and experts, and compiled a map of the whole region from Survey of India and other sources. In the *Journal* for September 1929 (p. 276), and January 1930 (pp. 35, 38, 44) appeared papers and letters on the subject; and at an afternoon meeting of the Society on 12 May 1930, I initiated a discussion with a paper that had previously been submitted to the Surveyor-General of India (Brigadier R. H. Thomas) and had received his general approval (*Geogr. J.* 76 (1930) 143-58). The resulting discussion however showed two apparently irreconcilable opinions, and it was felt that until a detailed modern map showing the relief of the whole area was available, it was impossible to reach a conclusion generally acceptable to all.

The work of preparing this map proceeded slowly, partly owing to the

difficulty of showing such great altitude differences by layer tints, partly because it was necessary to wait for the results of recent expeditions, and partly owing to pressure of work in the Society's drawing office. By the end of 1935 the map was sufficiently far advanced to approach the Surveyor-General (Brigadier H. J. Couchman) to ascertain his views and wishes. In March 1936 the Director of the Geodetic Branch of the Survey of India intimated, on behalf of the Surveyor-General, that a settlement was most desirable, that he would like to be represented at any further conference that might take place, that he would cordially accept an invitation to such a conference, and that the winter of 1936-37 would be most suitable from his point of view.

The Council of the Society had some years before appointed a small Com-



The Karakoram

mittee, with Sir Charles Close as chairman, to deal with the preparation of the map; and from this Committee they chose three members to be their representatives at the conference. Invitations to the conference were sent both to the Surveyor-General and to the Director of the Geological Survey of India, and a collection of cuttings giving the views of various authorities was sent by the Society to them and others interested. During the summer of 1936 a provisional edition of the Society's map was brought out and also sent to these people.

Meanwhile in India the whole policy of naming features in uninhabited and little-visited parts of the Himalaya was under consideration, the result of which was the issue of a letter from the Surveyor-General to various bodies interested, among which were the Royal Geographical Society and the

Himalayan Club. This letter, dated September 1, laid down the principles which would underlie the policy of the Survey of India regarding the naming of peaks and other features in the Himalaya and neighbouring mountain ranges. Sir Harold Couchman's letter is as follows:

As you are perhaps aware the question of the entry of names invented by explorers and others for peaks and other features of the mountain systems to the north of India on maps published by the Survey of India is one on which there has been occasional controversy.

The practice of the Survey of India in the past has been that no names should be entered on its maps, of areas for which it considers itself responsible, unless they have been found to be of local or at least indigenous origin. It has admittedly departed from this practice in the case of Mount Everest, but it will be generally agreed that the highest mountain in the world is entitled to special treatment, especially when the result was so euphonious. In the absence of a local or indigenous name, the old practice was to allot a symbol, usually a letter and a number. This practice has however been abandoned on our maps for many years except in the case of K² which, as probably the second highest mountain, is perhaps also entitled to special treatment.

This practice has had two results, one favourable, the other unfavourable. The favourable result is that there has been no temptation to give personal names to peaks, the embarrassment of selection of the person to be so honoured has been avoided, and the situation, not unknown, of the name of a peak being changed because the reputation of its owner had lessened has not occurred.

The Survey of India will always be grateful to its predecessors for this result.

The unfavourable result is that owing to absence of local or indigenous names in these sparsely inhabited areas our maps are undoubtedly deficient in names. With the increasing growth of Himalayan travel this defect is becoming of increasing prominence.

The position has therefore been examined and it has been decided that the embargo on invented, other than personal, names should be removed.

Invented names will be accepted by the Survey of India for its maps taking into consideration the following points:

- (i) Lack of local names in the vicinity.
- (ii) Suitability of the names.
- (iii) When applicable, the degree of currency among climbers and explorers that they have already obtained.
- (iv) Personal names will not be accepted.

Suitability is difficult to define, but entirely fanciful or humorous names will not be acceptable. Well-known English names of peaks, such as those in the Karakoram and the Sikkim Himalaya, will be considered for adoption at once.

You will no doubt agree that this change in policy should be brought to the notice of travellers and I would request your assistance in doing so either by the publication of this letter or by a reference to its contents.

The Survey of India will be grateful to past, present, and future explorers for any suggestions they may care to make. As regards the language of the names we would prefer that English names be confined to the more popular climbing centres. In the lesser-known regions explorers are requested to suggest names freely after consultation with their local guides or coolies. Nalas, cols, glaciers and peaks may be named after some local pasturage or other existing name, or may be invented with reference, say, to shape, colour, or some other

distinctive feature. Such names should normally be given in the local vernacular and should be pointed out to the local people so that they may the more rapidly gain currency. English names should be given sparingly in areas which are likely to be unimportant from a mountaineering point of view.

Explorers are requested to report their proposed names with sketches or annotated copies of Survey of India maps to me either direct or through you. In sending in reports full details should be given of the reasons for the proposed names, with meanings in English, and the local language adopted.

On receipt of this letter it seemed to us that during the winter conference we might usefully discuss, not only the broader questions of regional and range names, but also the detailed grouping of massifs in the Karakoram, their names, and those of their chief individual summits. I had collected a large number of notes and references relating to this subject during the last fifteen years, and had already arranged many of the known peaks and massifs into groups. It had already appeared to me certain that if we were to obtain a settlement of the main problem which would be acceptable to all and which would avoid the barren controversies of the past, we must abandon the old proposals which I had put forward and pressed in 1927 and 1930, in spite of the fact that they had gained a considerable amount of support and acceptance. We had to find some other classification of the mountains which embodied the points of agreement and met the criticisms of those who objected most strongly to the earlier proposals. During the last three months of the year I therefore drew up a detailed draft memorandum for discussion by the conference, and placed the major groups tentatively on our provisional map.

Colonel C. G. Lewis, then Director of the Geodetic Branch of the Survey of India, who had held charge of the recent modern surveys in the Chitral and Gilgit Agencies, and who had considerable experience of the difficulties of the problem, was appointed by the Surveyor-General to represent the Survey of India. He arrived in November 1936, bringing with him the maps and blue prints of the still later surveys.

The draft memorandum was then exhaustively examined point by point at no less than nine informal meetings of the conference. As soon as the first general principles were agreed upon, the general approval of the Surveyor-General was asked and obtained. As work progressed, Colonel Lewis explained the proposals to Sir Sidney Burrard, who had taken so active an interest in the matter since it became acute ten years ago. Typed copies were sent to India for examination and criticism. By the time the conference met officially on March 23, the revised memorandum, which had been circulated for a last scrutiny, was practically in its final form. With a few minor amendments it was then set up in type and copies were circulated to those geographers and travellers known to be particularly interested.

It was most gratifying to learn that the proposals met with general approval, Sir Sidney Burrard's support being particularly generous. In a letter dated 23 April 1937, he wrote as follows:

Lewis has shown me the outlines of your solution of the Karakoram problem. This problem has confronted the Survey for fifty years. Colonel Strahan used to mention it as unsolved. I must send you my congratulations on your success in finding a solution that is both scientific and artistic. Your Committee's

solution will meet with the approval of British India and of Central Asian explorers. I regard your success as remarkable.

When a long outstanding problem is solved, it is generally easy to say that the solution is obvious. But the fact remains that the problem of Karakoram nomenclature has been a real difficulty facing the Survey of India for half a century. The solution has only been attained by much thought and work; and I can only do justice to my own feelings by sending you my warm congratulations.

I should like to place on record my own personal appreciation of this generous tribute to the Committee's work.

The conclusions of the conference were reported to the Council on 5 April 1937, and the detailed recommendations were submitted to the Surveyor-General of India for sanction. In a letter dated 30 August 1937, he gave his approval to the proposals without qualification of any kind. I should like to take this opportunity of thanking Sir Harold Couchman and Brigadier Lewis, who has since succeeded him in the Surveyor-Generalship, for their courtesy and close co-operation throughout.

A few remarks regarding the decisions may perhaps not be out of place. The general principles underlying the scheme have been to define and name the topographical features as they exist to-day and to avoid theorizing on their structure and origin. Much of the confusion that has arisen in recent years has been due to the introduction of conflicting theories of structure based on insufficient data. Once we had a comprehensive map showing not only the relief and topography clearly from the most recent surveys, but also such details as the ice and permanent snow, it became a problem of dividing the whole region into suitable geographical blocks, of sub-dividing these blocks into suitable groups and massifs, and then of searching for and agreeing upon the most suitable names. This meant a detailed study of the writings and maps of a large number of explorers and cartographers, and the settlement of a number of conflicting statements. The names of the larger divisions were first agreed upon. The name "Karakoram," which had originally been extended from the pass of that name to the mountains by European geographers, was further extended to include the whole region to which subsequent travellers have applied it, while the term "The Great Karakoram" was accepted for the great alinement of ice massifs that extends from one end of the region to the other. It was felt that the locally preferred name "Muztagh," which also had considerable historical significance, could be suitably applied to the major divisions of the Great Karakoram. The muztaghs lent themselves to subdivision into groups, and the groups into massifs and individual peaks. It was felt that the term *muztagh* was inappropriate either linguistically or descriptively for the subdivisions of the lesser Karakoram, and, for want of a better term, they were called "ranges." The muztaghs have been named in every instance but one from the great glaciers which drain them; the ranges of the Lesser Karakoram from the most conspicuous mountain on their alignment.

The groups have been named from the best known locally named feature, often a glacier, whenever possible from the most accessible side; there are a

few exceptions, where it has been deemed advisable to retain some name that has long been associated with the group in existing literature, as, for instance, the Kanjut Group. A few of the more important unnamed peaks have been named, either from their group-names, or from an accessible locality, with a suitable affix such as *Sar*, or *Kangri*, according to the language of the region, and according to local practice. A few of the recognized English names for the best known and most prominent peaks have been retained, but only a very few. The names so retained from long usage are K², the Muztagh Tower, and Broad Peak. The "Hidden Peak" of Conway has long been known in the records of the Survey of India as Gasherbrum I, and this official name is retained. The conspicuous unclimbed summit north-east of K², inappropriately called "Staircase" on unofficial maps of the past, has been named "Skyang Kangri," from the glacier on its north. A number of other unofficial English names for peaks have been rejected; some of these peaks have been renamed, while the renaming of others has been left to subsequent travellers. All personal names have been discarded. Notes are given in the appendices explaining the different questions involved. Regions which are or were inadequately mapped at the time of the conference have been left in outline for subsequent treatment.

It is not to be expected that all the decisions reached will meet with the approval of every student of Karakoram literature and geography. It is true that controversy is keenest where facts are fewest. In these distant and sparsely inhabited lands some conventionalism is essential to the needs of ordered geography, and it is to be hoped that travellers and geographers will in future accept the nomenclature that has been agreed upon and authorized. In some instances it may be necessary to allude in papers to old and unofficial nomenclature for the purposes of identification, but it is hoped that travellers will co-operate to bring into use the authorized names as early as possible, so that the literature of the Karakoram may be freed from the ambiguities and inconsistencies of the past.